DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 887 FL 020 742

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TITLE A Conceptual Framework for Intercultural/International Communication.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions (11th, Ypsilanti, MI, March 25-28, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Applied Linguistics; *Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Context; Cultural Differences; Global Approach; Higher Education; International Communication; *Multicultural Education
IDENTIFIERS Gods Must Be Crazy (The)

ABSTRACT

The ambiguities of intercultural communication are examined in this paper. The concept posed is that although every culture sees the world according to that culture's heritage and history, immediate contexts also shape meanings. In multicultural contexts, those meanings must be constructed partly anew each time by speakers, writers, listeners, and readers, across their differences of language, culture, and world views. Four concepts of interculturalism are discussed: (1) instability and equivocality of messages that cross cultures, as illustrated by the Coca-Cola bottle in the film, "The Gods Must Be Crazy"; (2) cultural construction (the change of cultural identity); (3) cultural heterogeneity; and (4) dialogue communication and approaches and attitudes that block it (modes of intercultural communication, problems with the transmission model of communication, and intercultural misunderstanding and miscommunication). Contains 18 references. (LB)

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A Conceptual Framework for Intercultural/International Communication

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Problem

I became interested in defining a conceptual framework for pedagogy and research in intercultural communication when I began to train GTAs to teach basic business and technical writing course. I looked at 1980s business and technical writing textbooks and wanted to go beyond what they were saying about international communication.

When I asked a student in this training course to give an oral report on international communication, he provided the class with nothing but stereotyped generalizations about other peoples: the Japanese were like this, he said, and the French were like that; Latinos are something else all together. The disturbing thing was that he got his information from business and technical writing books in the library. I wanted to try to go beyond the approach of stereotypes and faulty generalizations that these books surely fostered.

I also wanted to go beyond the approach of simply giving concrete examples of documents in various languages. This latter approach illustrates different format and stylistic conventions in various cultures, yet again, it does not go to the heart of what defines intercultural and international communication. The source of the difficulty for my students was an absence of a conceptual framework in which to think about interculturalism and internationalism.

Solution

So I decided to do something unconventional, to begin a treatment of interculturalism with the popular 1980's film The Gods Must Be Crazy. Although the film parades a slap-stick of Africa across the screen, its story's germ-- an empty Coca-Cola bottle falling from the sky into the hands of hunters and gatherers--provides an entertaining and intriguing entry into the ambiguities of the intercultural. Touched by two wide'y

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separate worlds, the Coca-Cola bottle becomes an object whose meaning is constructed differently by each. On the one hand, the bushmen give it meanings and uses (for digging, for playing games, for piping tunes) that make sense in their world; on the other hand, we, of a different, post-industrialized tribe, wonder how anyone could mistake a soft-drink bottle for anything other than what it is, and are both amused by the bushmen's resourcefulness and moved by their anxiety and reverence toward this inscrutable gift from the "gods."

I began with this film and the ambiguous Coca-Cola bottle because the latter exemplifies the essential predicament of the intercultural, which is this: the instability of signifiers outside of their usual cultural contexts and the equivocality of those signifiers that cross between cultures. Although every culture sees the world according to that culture's heritage and history, immediate contexts also shape meanings; in multicultural contexts, those meanings must be constructed partly anew each time by speakers and writers, listeners and readers, across their differences of language, culture, and world views. For this reason intercultural or cross-cultural communication holds the potential both for new understanding and for old and new misunderstandings.

Four Concepts of Interculturalism

Before we can teach and research intercultural communication, we need a conceptual framework. We must be attuned to the instability of "messages" that cross between cultures, comprehend that a culture is a changing construction as well as a heritage and an acquisition, perceive a culture's heterogeneity (the mixture of cultures within a culture), and recognize the dialogic nature of intercultural communication.

Concept 1: Instability and Equivocality of Messages that Cross Cultures

We've already noted this concept through reference to the Coca-Cola bottle of the film The Gods Must Be Crazy. A message means something only within a specific cultural context. A sentence of the French philosopher Montaigne eloquently expresses this idea: "What truth lies on this side of the mountains that is falsehood on the other side?"[1] The

basic idea here is that everything is contextual, and that meanings change as contexts change.

Concept 2: Cultural Construction

We normally think of culture as an acquisition and an agent, something that we learn and something that acts upon us. From this perspective, anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn has defined culture as "patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting."[2]

Geert Hofstede and Edward T. Hall also view culture in this manner. In Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values, Geert Hofstede calls culture "the collective programming of the mind"; while in Understanding Culture Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall view culture as a "computer program," comparing it to "a giant, extraordinary complex subtle computer" (Hall and Hall 1990, pp. 3-4).

But is culture really like a computer? In my classes I argue that each culture constitutes not only an acquisition of "patterned thinking, feeling, and reacting," but also a construction that continuously reinterprets itself and the world, drawing from what is "foreign" or outside of the culture and adapting, with varying degrees, aspects of that foreignness to its own contexts.

Unlike a computer program, a culture is open, adaptive, and protean. A culture changes through interactions with other cultures, sometimes rejecting foreign elements, while at others, permanently adapting them to contexts which are in their turn changed by the adaptation. Like a living language, a living culture changes moment by moment, constructing itself through interactions among its own diverse elements and what is foreign to it.

Today this process of cultural construction has, if anything, accelerated. With the increased immigration of peoples throughout the world, with global markets and telecommunication networks, our cultural identity, as well as other peoples', has become problematic, increasingly homogeneous in certain aspects yet increasingly heterogeneous in others.

Researchers are focusing on a new diversity that is the product of the interrelationships between and the mixing of cultures. Ulf Hannerz, in "The World System of Culture: The International Flow of Meaning and its Local Management," contends that cross-cultural interaction is creating not a uniform, global culture--as many people had feared--but a more complex heterogeneity:

> The people in my favorite Nigerian town drink Coca Cola, but they drink burukutu too; and they can watch Charlie's Angels as well as Hausa drummers on television sets which spread rapidly as soon as electricity has arrived. My sense is that the world system, rather than creating massive cultural homogeneity on a global scale, is replacing one diversity with another; and the new diversity is based relatively more on interrelations and less on autonomy. (Clifford 1988, p. 17)

Futurologist Alvin Toffler concurs with Hannerz's analysis: "As the mass society of the industrial era disintegrates under the impact of the Third Wave [a post-industrial civilization based on information exchange and the power of knowledge], regional, local, ethnic, social, and religious groups grow less uniform. Conditions and needs diverge. Individuals, too, discover or reassert their differences" (Toffler 1981, p. 316).

In Chocs de cultures (Cultural Collisions), Carmel Camilleri observes that cultural codes in today's highly technological, heterogeneous societies like the United States, Great Britain, and France "have a tendency to become vague, because plural, multivocal" (Camilleri 1989a, p. 55).[3] What does it mean, in terms of today's cultural codes, to be American, or French, or British? It can mean only many things, because each of these societies has become increasingly diverse through exchanges with a foreignness that has adapted to and, in varying degrees, been partially assimilated by the respective society.

Such is our world in the 1990s, a world of people in movement, of global products and telecommunication networks on the one hand and of newly created cultural diversity on the other. Yes, one acquires a culture, but today, more than ever before, one also chooses and constructs one's culture. This is revolutionary. We need to appreciate that our culture not only creates us, but we also create it.

Concept 3: Cultural Heterogeneity

In addition to the concept of culture as a construct, it is essential that teachers and students comprehend that nations are usually composed of several cultures and that each of those is itself a hybrid of heterogeneous elements.

Equating nations with monolithic entities and thinking of individuals in terms of stereotyped national behavior leads away from reality into abstractions, and this in turn leads to lost clients and markets. When the Raytheon company hired Italian-Americans to manage its operations in Sicily, David Ricks recounts in his entertaining book, Big Business Blunders, it failed to consider the cultural differences between mainland Italy and Sicily; consequently, even though the company selected Italian-American managers for the Sicilian posts, these managers were not "trusted or accepted" at the company branch because their family ties were with the mainland, not the island (Ricks 1983, 58). Thinking of Italy as homogeneous, Raytheon paid for the difference between the myth of nation and the actuality of regionalism.

Because almost every society is touched by, is made up of, diverse elements from many cultures, the cultural and the intercultural intertwine within a society. Today, when we speak of American culture we are certainly speaking of a mixture of Amerindian, European, African, and Asian cultures--to mention but a few--and the complex interrelationships among them. Societies everywhere have become multicultural, and even those that seem not to be, have been shaped in the course of their history by external as well as internal elements, by a variegated otherness that has been adapted to and incorporated within the society.

Today, in our world of global markets and accelerating, cross-cultural exchanges, we all live in one another's world, a world of collisions and confrontations that emerge not only from struggles for power but from blurred images of one another. Intercultural communication depends on understanding "ourselves among other peoples"; it depends on understanding that each culture is often plural and that each is a construct that constantly changes (Weiss 1992).

Concept 4: Dialogic Communication and Approaches and Attitudes That Block It

Modes of Intercultural Communication

A useful framework for an analysis of communication, Muneo Jay Yoshikawa's "The Double-Swing Model of Intercultural Communication between the East and the West" discusses four "modes" of intercultural encounter and exchange: the "ethnocentric," the "control," the "dialectical," and the "dialogical" (Yoshikawa 1987, pp. 320-23).

In the first or "ethnocentrist" mode, Yoshikawa explains, "A [the individual of one culture] perceives B [the individual of another culture] only in A's frame of reference. . . . The cultural integrity of B's culture, its uniqueness, and differences are simply ignored. Communication is one sided, and feedback is rendered ineffective by well-known psychological processes of selective attention, selective perception, and selective retention."

In the second or "control" mode, manipulative communication dominates: "B is perceived and manipulated as a thing or an object for A's purpose. B's cultural uniqueness and differences are recognized, but they are manipulated in order to achieve A's objectives."

In the third or "dialectical" mode, three outcomes are possible: A and B may combine their different viewpoints and achieve a "dialectical" unity or a synthesis, C. Or they may establish only "pseudo-dialectical" relationships in which either "A fuses into B and loses its identity" or "A coerces B to become part of A." These relationships foster

sameness not synthesis; someone, either A or B, loses in the exchange. In the dialectical mode generally, the emphasis is on fusion, whether the fusion of synthesis or of sameness.

Finally, in the fourth or "dialogical" mode, A and B recognize their difference yet "interdependence": "A does not appear in its wholeness in isolation but rather in relationship to B. While A and B are separate and independent, they are simultaneously interdependent." They know each other better through the exchange and illuminate each other's potentialities.

Problems with the Transmission Model of Communication

The transmission model gives "the message" a stability that it rarely has; for this reason the model cannot make sense of communication in a pluralistic world, that is, a world of distinct cultures and their distinctly different interpretations of it.

The transmission model celebrates a matched "coding" and "decoding" of pre-packaged messages--but this matching does not account for the ambiguity of human communication or the challenges of intercultural communication. Only a model that takes into account the distinctness and interdependency of discourse participants and the changing, unstable, constructed nature of meaning can begin to describe intercultural communication.

Unlike the ethnocentric, control, or dialectical modes, a dialogic mode of communication is based on the interdependence of discourse participants who build a bridge of commonality while at the same time retaining their different linguistic and cultural identities.

Intercultural Misunderstanding and Miscommunication

We live in a nation and a world of cultural diversity; miscommunication stems not from that diversity or difference per se, but from a flawed response to it. In Chocs de cultures, Carmel Camilleri discusses approaches and appraisals that block intercultural communication.

Approaches

1. The "absence of a recognition of difference," a flawed approach that is inherent in the ethnocentrist mode of communication. The ethnocentrist lives wrapped in a cultural cocoon, unreceptive to values of other cultures; his mind has closed either to difference itself or to the essential equality of all cultures.[4] The ethnocentrist may believe that his culture is better than others', an approach to human diversity that is roughly equivalent to believing that apples are better than oranges, or vice versa.[5] Ethnocentrism presents a formidable barrier to communication, and it is a barrier often associated with Americans abroad, isolated from others by their inability to speak a country's language(s) and their confidence in their own way of seeing and doing things.

2. Ignorance of cultural codes--whether an ignorance of a region's or country's distinct cultural systems, or of the in's-and-out's of the particular culture with which one has contacts and encounters--constitutes a second flawed approach to the intercultural. This "ignorance" may be due to a lack of information, or, it may be the result of a tendency to think of other peoples as "just like us." This vague universalism, with its underlying assumptions of human sameness, can hinder rather than facilitate communication because it projects our cultural codes onto those of others and thus masks their codes from our eyes and damages a people's sense of self-identity.

Not only ignorance but also a belief in the sameness of all peoples would seem to underlie any international marketing strategy that does not alter according to the cultural context.

3 . The bypassing of a culture's intra-contextuality leads to other flawed approaches that derive, for example, from an ignorance or misunderstanding of the fields of reference and networks within another culture and the manner in which an individual may organize and interpret information and fit into those networks. "[E]very individual lives as linked to a network with multiple, interdependent levels," Camilleri explains; one cannot ignore that network when communicating with someone . . . (Camilleri 1989, "Communication" 365-66). Even for individuals of the same culture, the "symbolic field"

of reference (such as religion) and the "social field" of reference (such as economic class) may be quite different; even within the same country or region of a country, the networks of power and communication can vary drastically from company to company. Moreover, because the individual is not synonymous with the field or the network, there may be a variety of ways for him or her to relate to them.

To communicate effectively in an intercultural context one must recognize cultural difference and not devalue a culture simply because it is distinct from one's own; one must be familiar with the other culture's codes, fields of reference, and networks of power and communication as well as the individual's position within those fields and networks.

One must perceive the culture within the individual and the individual within the culture. As J. M. Lorenzo succinctly writes: "to communicate is to know the other person in all his or her dimensions."[6]

Appraisals

1. Errors stemming from exclusion/inclusion. When confronted with difference, we tend to reject the difference if we cannot relate it to ourselves and the social groups to which we belong. We exclude any individual who possesses this cultural difference on the basis of this difference alone. Thus, difference turns into "foreignness" turns into exclusion. "The category of 'foreignness' and its eventual hardening into exclusion can be based on any objective difference (to say nothing of those imaginary differences) that proliferate in social reality," Camilleri explains (1989b, p. 378). Conversely, errors of inclusion follow an opposite path. That is, on the basis of an individual's membership in a group to which we belong (e.g., employees at the same company, members of the same professional organization, homeowners in the same neighborhood), we shortsightedly overlook basic cultural differences and thus reduce the uniqueness of that individual. Inclusion turns into sameness. Individuals are not a mosaic of various belongings or memberships in groups, for to view them as such would be to strip them of a history and subjectivity that co-exists with memberships yet is uncircumscribed by them.

2. Blanket categorizations invest a trait with unfounded content and deny the individuality of persons who may possess that particular trait.[7]

Viewing a person as a "perfect copy" of a culture is a related error of stereotyping. "Mohammed is such an Arab" or "François is really a Frenchman" are comparisons that inscribe stereotypes; because all cultures comprise diverse groups of diverse individuals, one cannot talk meaningfully about behavior that is perfectly Arabic or perfectly French. In North America, peoples from Africa, Central America, and Asia are common targets of a stereotyping that denies variation within these widely heterogeneous groups. An electrical engineer from Tunisia has told me that Americans he meets have expressed surprise that, since he is an African, his skin color is not black. David Ricks cites numerous examples of business blunders deriving from categorization and stereotyping, such as the promotion of a product in the wrong language. In Dubai, where 90 percent of the people originate from India, Iran, or elsewhere, Western firms have promoted products in Arabic, although only 10 percent of the country's people speak that language. Blinded by a blanket categorization, these firms thought of Dubai as just another Middle Eastern (hence Arabic) country (Ricks 1983, p. 53).[8]

Within each culture exist groups within groups, all of which are composed of individuals whose attitudes and actions do not mirror a type but respond to and create an actuality.

In conclusion, I believe that an understanding of the intercultural and the international depends on at least a passive understanding of the four, broad concepts discussed in this paper. Such a conceptual framework can support new developments in teaching and research, and through these developments we will truly begin to prepare our students to meet the challenge of business in the 1990s and beyond.

[1]"Quelle vérité que ces montagnes borment, qui est mensonge au monde qui se tient au delà?" Montaigne, Essais, II, XII, 34, based on a quotation of Pascal. Cited by Geert Hofstede, Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values, Abridged Edition (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1984) 217, 231.

[2]Clyde Kluckhohn, quoted by Hofstede, 21.

[3]Isn't this new actuality--and the insecurities that go along with it--at the root of the flap about multiculturalism in education? The really profound question here has to do with the breakdown of identities and the syncretistic construction of new ones, but we will always ask the wrong question if we conceive of culture only as a permanent acquisition and not also as a provisional, continuing construction.

[4]Althouth the Spanish explorers of the Americas, for example, recognized the differences between Amerindians and themselves, they did not find value in those differences and thus did not treat the Indians as equals; to them the Indians were either obstacles or resources, perhaps as valuable as wood but less valuable than gold. See Tzvetan Todorov, La Conquête de l'Amérique: La question de l'autre (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982).

[5]Indeed, are certain cultures superior to others? Only by studying the long-range effects of particular solutions that cultures brings to their particular problems can this question be treated. In the twentieth century traditionalist cultures in Africa, Asia, Central and South America, and other regions of the world have been overwhelmed by Western cultures, but in time certain traditionalist cultures may show themselves to be more successful at solving basic life problems and better suited to carry life forward.

[6]". . .communiquer c'est appréhender l'autre dans toutes ses dimensions."
J. M. Lorenzo, quoted by Carmel Camilleri, "La communication dans la perspective interculturelle," Chocs de cultures: concepts et enjeux pratiques de l'interculturel (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1989) 368.

[7]Some categorization of culture characteristics and peoples is probably unavoidable; if based on sufficient and carefully interpreted information, the categorization can become a useful tool toward understanding. Hofstede's Culture's Consequences is an example of categorizations based on a large collection of data interpreted judiciously.

[8]Ricks also cites the failure of an American manager to distinguish among tribes and social groups on a South Pacific island; to this particular manager, every non-Westerner was simply a "native" (8).

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